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ABSTRACT

In contrast to the educational reform reports of the 1970's, which criticized schools' irrelevance, inequality, and authoritarianism, the flood of reports that appeared in 1983 focus on the danger to the nation's global preeminence and military defense caused by mediocre education. Although most reports uphold a commitment to equity, this is overshadowed by the emphasis placed on excellence (as in the Sputnik era) and the raising of academic standards. The new reform reports generally agree that the purposes of education have become too diffuse: literacy, they say, should become a priority, with personal growth skills, work skills, and social and civic skills as secondary goals. Most of the 1983 reports call for a common curriculum, and are unanimous in condemning tracking (insofar as it precludes equal access to knowledge and discriminates against minority children) and most ignore or criticize vocational education. The reports agree that computer literacy must have a place in basic education, but disagree on questions concerning time spent in school. Most blame the crisis in education on the teaching profession, but vary in their recommendations for solving current problems affecting teachers. Finally, the reports tend to advocate decrease in federal and an increase in state and local responsibility. (KH)

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The 1983 Educational Reform Reports

by Carol Ascher

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The 1983 Educational Reform Reports

During 1983, a flood of private and public commissions issued their findings and recommendations for educational, largely secondary school, reform. Whereas reports during the 1970s had criticized the irrelevance, inequality and authoritarianism of public high school education, the new reports are reminiscent of those issued in the 1950s, in what became known as the Sputnik era, when the United States attempted to compete with Russian advances by upgrading math, science, and foreign language teaching and curriculum.

A common premise of the 1983 proposals is that the nation's global preeminence in science, technology, industry, commerce, and military defense is threatened by its mediocre education. While the National Commission on Excellence in Education warns of our "slim competitive edge . . . in the information age," the Twentieth Century Task Force Fund talks about "social difficulties" (8, 13). As in the Sputnik era, the term "excellence," nearly absent from the 1970s' educational reform discussions, has reappeared in the new reports.

In fact, the questions implicitly raised by both sets of reports go back nearly one hundred years. The questions are still whether the function of high school is to prepare all youth for their various life paths or to prepare only a small proportion of college-preparatory students; whether there should be a common curriculum or differentiated offerings; and whether the high school should be responsible merely for imparting organized knowledge or also for values, attitudes, creativity and self-realization.

Excellence and Equity

The current reports state their commitment to equity within the context of raising academic standards. In the words of Adler's *Paideia Proposal*, "The best education for the best is the best education for all" (1, p. 6). Boyer argues that the "failure to educate *every* young person to his or her full potential threatens the nation's social and economic health" (3, p 5). However, the proposals generally do not recognize that, because students are diverse, a uniform education will not necessarily create either uniform end results or even the maximum possible achievement for each student. Instead, some proposals establish such difficult requirements that many students will not be able to comply and so will either have to be given second-class programs and diplomas or simply drop out. Although the word equity is used repeatedly in a number of these reports, for the most part it appears as a symbol that has been deprived of the concreteness of its meaning.

The Goals of Education

The new reform reports generally agree that the purposes of education have become too varied and diffuse: education is charged with overcoming not only illiteracy, but unemployment, crime and war among nations. While the new reports still tend to connect their criticisms of schooling to their belief that something is wrong with our nation's social and economic life, their proposals for reform emphasize academic goals. Literacy in the larger sense is a common priority. Personal growth skills, work skills, and social and civic skills are prevailing but secondary goals.

Curriculum

In contrast to the reports of the 1970s in which *electives, options,* and *alternatives,* were central, the current reports stress the *New Basics,* a *common core curriculum,* or *prescribed curriculum.* Several recommend that all students be required to take more mathematics and science as well as more English, social studies and foreign languages; that computer science be added as a requirement; that "soft courses" or electives be severely curtailed and brought under tight control; and that students be frequently tested to assess their progress according to strict (and raised) standards. In fact, the New Basics or common core curriculum is essentially the traditional college-preparatory fare.

Perhaps reacting to the findings of the National Assessment for Educational Progress, that federal and state equal educational opportunity policies of the 1970s had a positive effect on student achievement, and that most students had mastered the basics before the "back to basics" movement began, several of the current proposals stress the importance of teaching the New Basics of higher-level processes, such as conceptualizing, critical thinking, and analysis. Sizer criticizes the emphasis in education on amassing quantities of information, and suggests that these higher order skills can best be learned through a much smaller body of knowledge. Sizer, as well as Boyer and Adler propose new divisions in the academic disciplines and suggest a different kind of teaching—using the dialogue of the Socratic method—for developing the higher intellectual skills, as well as emotional understanding and aesthetic appreciation.

Tracking

The 1983 reports are unanimous in condemning tracking, insofar as it precludes equal access to knowledge and discriminates against minority children. Several propose a "common core of subjects" (3), often recommending they be taught through "mastery learning" techniques (6) which all must achieve, "regardless of native ability, temperamental bent, or conscious preference" (1, p. 41). Few authors in this new group pay serious attention to the problems of management and pedagogy arising from wide differences among students. However, several exceptions should be noted: The National Commission on Excellence in Education recommends that student groupings and promotion be based on achievement and instructional need rather than age. Boyer argues for alternative schools for alienated students and special programs for such groups as potential dropouts and the gifted. The Urban Education Studies findings are that curriculum and instruction are best when initiated locally and adapted to individuals' stages of development and cultural values. The National Assessment for Educational Progress recommends that, based on the success of the 1970s programs for disadvantaged students, such programs be continued.

Vocational Education

An effective education-work policy was a consistent theme in the report of the 1970s. By contrast, current reports such as that of the National Commission on Excellence in Education do not mention vocational education at all, while others give it little but largely critical attention. According to Adler, "training for particular jobs is not the education of free men and women" (1, p. 7). Boyer would eliminate the vocational track, but not abolish vocational courses. He also proposes a "new Carnegie unit" of 30 hours a year of voluntary service to the school or community. Goodlad would create a common curriculum to provide students with equal access to knowledge, plus the "development of a mature perspective on careers, career choice, and bases of career decision-making" (6, p. 344); he suggests a phase of "work, study, and service conducted within an educational ethos" (6, p. 347).

By proposing a common core curriculum with few electives, the reformers tend to assert that a sound general/liberal education is "truly vocational" (1, p. 18), that all secondary school students need career orientation but not job-specific training, that career

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orientation is best undertaken in experiential-based internship programs, and that equity is best achieved through avoiding the second-class status of vocational training.

Technology

The reports agree on the new place of computer literacy in basic education (though the notion of what this "literacy" is differs and in some reports is quite vague). They also advocate the use of computers as a means of extending instruction. Several writers are critical about the ways new technologies are used, not used, or misused in education. The reports argue for developing career competencies based on computer skills in some students, but do not reflect the current debate concerning the opportunities for computer-related careers.

Time

The reports disagree over whether increasing the amount of time spent in school should be a priority, or if the focus should be more effective use of existing classroom hours. Among those who favor increasing the amount of time are the National Commission on Excellence in Education (which proposes a 7-hour day, 200-220 day year); Goodlad (who argues for 25 hours a week of instructional time, compared with the current average of 22.5 hours); the Education Commission of the States which makes no specific recommendation); and the National Science Board Commission (which provides specific proposals for increasing time spent in mathematics and science).

On the other side, Boyer argues that better use of time, not time itself, should be the focus, while Sizer takes the position that this and all other decisions should be made locally, by individual principals and teachers, according to the needs of their students.

Teachers and Teaching

The reports agree that, though teachers are generally idealistic and well-meaning, the crisis in education must be laid at the door of the teaching profession. Not only is there a shortage of teachers in key subjects such as mathematics, science, and foreign languages, but teachers are generally not academically able, are inadequately and inappropriately trained, are poorly paid, work under difficult and unattractive conditions, and are simply not up to their tasks.

Several reports note that admission and graduation requirements in schools of education are too low, and that the courses offered need improvement and perhaps radical change. Most of the reports argue for a more solid academic grounding in the subjects teachers will teach, with less time devoted to pedagogical training. The Southern Regional Educational Board's Task Force on Higher Education recommends that selection procedures be applied throughout the entire teacher preparation process and that all education programs be evaluated for quality and productivity. The Education Commission of the States Task Force argues that states should improve the certification process, as well as tighten procedures for evaluating those who continue to teach.

Several authors suggest strategies for renewing teaching as a profession. Sizer proposes that we stop treating teachers like "hired hands" and restore to them "the respect-laden autonomy enjoyed by other professionals" (10, p. 184). Boyer suggests cutting teachers' daily class meetings, giving teachers an hour daily for class preparation, and exempting them from clerical and supervisory chores. Goodlad argues for reducing teachers' instructional time and initiating school-based programs for staff improvement.

A number of reports also propose recognition and awards for outstanding teachers, including summer study and travel, well-defined career ladders (with salary, title, and responsibility increments), and special local, state and national rewards for excellence. The Southern Regional Educational Board Task Force is the only group to deal specifically with the problem of recruiting minority teachers.

Those reports that deal specifically with shortages in mathematics and science stress the need for flexibility in requirements, increases in salaries, and other special incentives. The Southern Regional Educational Board Task Force suggests scholarship and loan programs to attract science and mathematics teachers, the waiver of education requirements for math and science graduates, with safeguards to insure the quality of instruction, and refresher courses for teachers in surplus areas to catch up in the field. The National Science Board Commission argues that over the next five years the federal government should fund in-state teacher training programs to update knowledge in mathematics and science, and that the states should develop teacher training programs in cooperation with colleges, universities and science museums. Several reports suggest paying science and mathematics teachers higher wages to make these jobs competitive with other mathematics and science professions.

Althought the reports agree on the need for continuing education, there is little agreement about where and how it should take place, and under whose auspices and what conditions.

Federal, State and Local Roles and Responsibilities

A number of reports suggest, in passing, new federal, state and local roles—most tend to advocate a decrease in federal and an increase in state and local responsibility. A few proposals are directed specifically at the roles to be played by particular sectors. The Twentieth Century Fund Task Force argues for a continued federal role which replaces the current emphasis on regulations with a new emphasis on incentives. The Education Commission of the States, though acknowledging the importance of a strong federal commitment to education, focuses on state and local level action, because "national commitments, in our judgement, do not only trickle down; they also bubble up" (4, p. 3). The National Science Board's Commission gives the federal government a key role in implementing its action plan and assigns price tags to its recommendations.

—Carol Ascher

This ERIC Digest is based largely on *Reforming Schools in the 1980s: A Critical Review of the National Reports*, by A. Harry Passow (New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education).

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